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THE INDIVIDUALIZATION OF THE TEACHING OF SPELLING IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL.

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THIS REPORT IS A DOCUMENTATION OF THE INDIVIDUALIZATION OF THE TEACHING OF SPELLING IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PROGRAM, GRADES 2 THROUGH 6, AT MEEKER, COLORADO. THE PROGRAM IS ORIENTED TOWARD USING TAPE RECORDERS. THE RECORDED MATERIALS ARE TEACHER-MADE, EXCEPT FOR SOME COMMERCIAL PHONICS MATERIAL. EXPLANATIONS ARE PRESENTED ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION, PROCEDURE, EVALUATION, AND PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT ARE MADE. (JH)

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COLORADO WESTERN STATES SMALL SCHOOLS PROJECT

DOCUMENTATION

THE INDIVIDUALIZATION OF THE TEACHING OF SPELLING IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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1963 - 64

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THE WESTERN STATES SMALL SCHOOLS PROJECT

The Western States Small Schools Project, partly financed by a grant from the Ford Foundation, is designed to help the state education agencies in Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah in their efforts to improve instruction in the necessarily existent small schools. The Project began January, 1961 and will end August, 1965. Policy Board of the Project is composed of the chief state school officers of the cooperating states. Ralph G. Bohrson, Coordinator of the WSSSP, is headquartered in Denver, at the Colorado State Department of Education.

The Colorado portion of the Project, involving more than two hundred teachers and administrators in approximately thirty schools has been working in the following areas:

-- Ungraded or Continuous Progress Programs

-- Use of Self-Instructional Materials

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THE INDIVIDUALIZATION OF THE TEACHING OF SPELLING IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Introduction

The experimentation with an individualized spelling program done in the Meeker Elementary School was carried on in grades two through six. The decision to make an attempt at individualization in spelling was sparked by some common problems encountered by the teachers in these grades. They realized that some children were studying spelling lists too difficult for them while others were working on lists much too easy for them. Some children were able to master lists for the weekly spelling test but could not transfer this knowledge of words to their written work, or even to later spelling tests. Yet the teachers felt that the study of words made in connection with a child's regular school work needed to be supplemented by some kind of systematic instructions in daily spelling periods because studying words in lists seems to be the simplest and most effective way to learn words.

This project was felt to be an excellent one for a school of the size such as Meeker because teachers involved were able to discuss often such developments as methods being used and progress made.

The major findings of researchers in the area of spelling which are applicable to individualization have been summarized in the section of the B.Y.U. Laboratory Guide which deals with spelling. Since these are also basic to our program, they are quoted here:

1. The study of words made in connection with other curriculum areas needs to be supplemented by direct systematic instruction in daily spelling periods.
2. It is more efficient to study words in lists than in context.
3. When the meaning of a word is understood, children are more likely to use it in their writing.
4. Research shows that the best single learning activity per unit of time in learning to spell is the checking and correcting of one's own spelling test.[1]

One of the first steps taken in the development of this program was the visit by two of our teachers, Mrs. Parr and Mrs. Watt, to the Brigham Young University Laboratory School where they saw in operation the individualized spelling program being used by that school. Since the materials being used by the B.Y.U. program were not at this time copyrighted, they were given copies of the spelling lists and the laboratory guide for using the lists.

As several teachers had expressed interest in this program, it was decided to expand the project to all teachers in grades two through six. First grade teachers were not involved because their program does not include the regular study of words in lists.

It was decided to use the spelling lists from the B.Y.U. program and the basic method of presenting the words, with the understanding that teachers in our school could experiment with these materials to develop their own approaches to individualization.

The lists used contain approximately three to four thousand words. These words were selected by Hildreth from Rinsland's study of the words most frequently used in children's writing.[2]

We used these words as the Laboratory School had them arranged on levels; Level I being a list of words most frequently used by children, Level II being somewhat less frequently used, etc. Within each level the lists are divided into sections A, B, and sometimes C. In each section words are classified according to structural and phonetic generalizations. These sub-groups are not uniform in size. There are 36 classifications for sub-grouping. These are as follows:

Classifications # 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5--the short vowel sounds
Classifications # 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11--the long vowel sounds

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1. Brigham Young University Laboratory Guide, (1962-63), p. 1.
2. Ibid., p. 2.

Classification #12--the ow and ou sound as in how and cloud
Classification #13--the oo sound as in good
Classification #14--the or sound as in nor
Classification #15--the ar sound as in jar
Classification #16--the oy and oi sounds as in toy
Classification #17--the sound of o as in come
Classification #18--the sound of a as in call
Classification #19--the sound of oo as in room and new
Classification #20--the sound of a as in along
Classification #21--the murmur dipthongs of er, ir, ur, and or
Classification #22--the air sound as in pair and bare
Classification #23--the sound of ea as in death
Classification #24--the au and aw sound as in auto and awful
Classification #25--the sound of qu as in quick
Classification #26--silent letters as k in knife
Classification #27--compound words
Classification #28--contractions
Classification #29--capitalized proper nouns
Classification #30--two words used as one, such as all right
Classification #31--abbreviations
Classification #32--possessives
Classification #33--the prefix re-
Classification #34--suffixes such as tion, ment, etc.
Classification #35--hyphenated words
Classification #36--final words, or those which do not lend themselves to classification according to any one generalization.

Not all levels used words falling under each of these classifications. Level IB, for example, had no words under the classifications of 11, 16, 17, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, or 35. Omissions of groups varied with different levels because the only words classified were the words on the frequency level being used.

The advantage of using this arrangement of words is summarized in the B.Y.U. Laboratory Guide:

1. Students can often complete Section A (the easier words in a list) rather rapidly, thus gaining a sense of accomplishment. This often encourages them to move ahead into the next sub-level of words.

2. The small sub-groups generally provide a convenient grouping of words for daily lessons.

3. Studying words which are grouped according to certain phonetic and structural generalizations reinforces the teaching of word analysis skills in the reading program.

There are six levels of words in the program arranged in the above manner. In addition there were four supplementary levels labeled VII, VIII, IX, and X.

These provide practice for children who advance beyond Level VI. The words in each of these supplementary levels were arranged alphabetically and grouped for convenience under letter headings: A, B, C, D, etc.

Procedure

Basically the plan was to ascertain the spelling level of each child by administering inventory tests over as many levels as needed, beginning with Level I. These tests were teacher-prepared by random sampling of 50 words from each level. Children who made 10% or more errors on the inventory test on a certain level began their spelling program on that level. In each class there was a wide range in beginning placement, with the widest range being found in the sixth grade, where the range was from Level I to Level VI.

For the study and testing of word lists the B.Y.U. program depended upon the "buddy system" in which each child is paired with another on approximately the same level. This was the basic plan used in our intermediate grade classrooms. A student selects one or more groups of words from the level to which he has been assigned. In the intermediate grades he began his work on this list with a pre-test dictated by his spelling partner. As his partner used the words in sentences, the student wrote the words in his spelling notebook. He then checked his own words to determine those which he must study. He recorded the misspelled words and studied them, using these steps:[3]

a.) Pronounce each word correctly.
b.) Look carefully at each part of the word as it is pronounced.
c.) Say the letters in sequence.
d.) Attempt to recall how the word looks and spell the word to oneself.
e.) Check this attempt at recall.
f.) Write the word.
g.) Check this spelling attempt.
h.) Repeat the above steps as necessary.

As soon as the student was ready, his partner re-tested him over the same

3. Brigham Young University Laboratory Guide, (1962-63), p. 2

list of words. The student again checked his own words and listed the errors in his spelling record book.

In order to insure mastery of words studied, students were held to 90% accuracy on all tests. To double check for this mastery of words, the teacher administered periodic review tests over the lists covered by each student. This also served to impress upon the students the value of careful and honest checking of their own tests.

Spelling lists for children to use were duplicated and filed in the classroom according to level and group, so that they were accessible to the children. A central file of these words was kept in the school office so that teachers could replace copies of lists as needed. Other materials necessary for the introduction of the program were a spelling notebook for each student and a record-keeping notebook for the teacher.

In their spelling notebooks students wrote all tests which were given by their spelling partners and kept a record of misspelled words.

The teacher's record was designed to show three things. First, it recorded the point at which each student was working at periodic spelling roll calls. The teacher could then place check marks after the students' names under the appropriate level and group. This record could then be used to show when students had successfully passed review tests given by the teacher. This was shown by coloring the spaces for all groups so reviewed. The record book also contained a place for the scores for each of these review tests.

Each teacher developed her own system of record-keeping from the basic plan outlined above. A successful innovation developed was the use of simple, teacher-made progress charts for use by the students. On these charts they checked their progress through various lists. The chart showed the designated points for review tests so that the student could notify the teacher when he was ready for such a test. This made the periodic spelling notebook checks

much simpler for the teacher.[4]

As was stated earlier, teachers were allowed to experiment to determine the amount of individualization appropriate or possible in each classroom. Teachers in grades two and three soon found that they preferred to keep all students on a certain level in a group together so that more teacher presentation of material could be given. On the other hand, some teachers in the intermediate grades found that children could progress at greatly varying rates, especially if the tape recorder was utilized.

The tape recorder and teacher-recorded tapes were most easily used in classrooms equipped with jacks and earphones around the perimeter. However, the idea was also used with a jack box in other classrooms.

Here again, the tape recorder was used by different teachers in varying ways. In one classroom the teacher used tapes to test students over each group of words which was completed. This teacher found that these tests could be worked into the schedule throughout the day whenever the students had time, thus reducing the actual time for a spelling period as such to its most efficient minimum.

Another use of the tape recorder was to administer only the periodic review tests given by the teacher herself.

Advance preparation by the teacher required the recording of 70 of the review and final tests marked on the progress chart shown in the appendix of this paper. These tests were recorded on 7 inch or 5 inch reels. Generally about 12 tests consisting of 20 words could be recorded on one side of a 7 inch tape. For these tests the teacher pronounced the word, used it in a sentence, and then repeated the word again. A pause was then allowed for the student to write the word. If the words were given too fast for the student,

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4. A copy of the progress chart described in this paragraph is found in the appendix of this paper.

he could turn off the tape recorder between words, or, if necessary, rewind the tape to listen to words again.

Tape reels were labeled, as were the tape boxes containing the reels. The boxes also listed the tests found on that reel, and the number to which the student should run the tape to find his particular test.

In the actual classroom situation it was often found that it was advisable to have an alternate test for most of the review tests to prevent children from studying merely the twenty words on the review test if they had to go back over any lists of words for retesting. Lack of time did not make it possible to make alternate tests for all such review tests, but some were recorded for the tests which experience showed to be the ones most often repeated by students.

The tendency for students to concentrate on the words listed in a test which they had failed to pass was somewhat reduced by the fact that all review tests were returned to the teacher immediately after the student had seen his score and written the misspelled words in his record book. These tests were then filed in the teacher's file for use in parent-teacher conferences.

Each day students indicated whether they wished a review test from the teacher on the following day. The names of these students were compiled by the teacher so that all students ready for a certain review test on that day could take the test together. When the time came for the test, the students would get the proper tape, thread it on the tape recorder, locate the desired test and take the test by listening to the words being pronounced on the tape. Earphones were used so that the students being tested did not disturb others and classroom noise did not disturb them.

These tests were then checked by the teacher and recorded. If the student scored 90% or better correct, he recorded his score on his progress chart and proceeded to the next list. If his score was less than 90%, he would go

back and review the lists covered by that review test.

At the completion of each level a final test over the level would be given, with 90% correct also being required before the child moved on to the next level.

The teacher's record consisted of a progress chart marked in a manner similar to that of the student. However, the teacher recorded all scores on teacher-dictated tests attempted by the child. These scores were averaged at the end of the grading period and placed on the report card along with the spelling level of the student. Thus the spelling report of a student might be II 90, indicating that he was spelling on Level II with an average of 90% correct. Another student in the same class might have a report of VI 85, showing that he was spelling on Level VI with an average of 85% correct.

Use of the tape recorder enabled students to move at their own speed without the teacher having to find time to dictate a test over on a certain level before the child could move on. On some days enough different tests were desired to make the use of two or three tape recorders in a classroom desirable. Of course, this method of giving tests made other arrangements possible. For instance, the list of tests could be posted at the beginning of the day and students could take the tests as they found time or a free tape recorder during the day.

When the program was organized in the above manner, progress through the lists varied widely. Although students were assigned partners on their own level at the beginning of the program, very few partners continued to work on the same lists each day. Since any student could take a review test when he was ready, this made little difference. Because children were on varying levels, the teacher did no whole class explaining of a group of words after the program was once underway. Instead, she helped individual children with their word problems. While children were learning how to locate tests on

the tape recorder, or lists of words in the spelling file, some of the teacher's time was spent in helping with such details. However, most intermediate students became fairly proficient at this after enough practice.

It might also be noted here than an individualized approach to the practice of penmanship was used with this spelling program. As test papers were checked by the teacher, faulty penmanship was marked and a small sheet containing the correct form for making the letter or explaining the error was attached to the spelling paper before it was returned to the child so that he would use that as his practice assignment in penmanship.

Problems Encountered

Probably the major problems encountered by teachers in implementing this spelling program were the following:

1. The use of duplicated sheets is unhandy. They are easily lost or torn. Younger students had trouble locating sheets in the file. Teachers remember longingly the old convenient workbook.
2. Teachers felt insecure in a situation in which they were not directing the entire process of study. They often tended to feel that learning could not take place unless they explained the thing to be learned to the whole class.
3. The buddy system is not a quiet, orderly method of study. While it does not have to be bedlam, yet there is much more activity than in the traditional spelling classroom. Some teachers felt that no learning could take place in such an atmosphere.
4. When students are allowed to progress at their own rate, the snail's pace set by some of them is alarming. To some teachers, this was an indication of the failure of the entire program. On the other hand, some students progress so rapidly that extra work is created for the teacher as she tries to keep material prepared for them.

There is also the constant problem created by students who rush ahead and must then go back because they have failed to master material.

5. The organization of words into sub-groups in this program was somewhat confusing to those used to uniform lists. The reasons for the arrangements must be carefully explained or the numbering of sub-groups seems merely erratic.
6. There is much time and work involved in experimentation with this type of program before all the details of organization can be worked out. This seems excessive at the outset of the program and can easily destroy a teacher's enthusiasm.

Improvement Resulting from this Program

On the other hand, there were many indications that there was an improvement in the spelling program. One of these could be found in the general student enthusiasm for this type of program, and especially in the development of an attitude of willingness to assume responsibility for one's own progress. To be sure, this was not true of all students, but all those who did develop even a small measure of this responsibility have taken at least a step in the direction toward the type of education which we claim to work for in our schools.

One indication of improvement resulting from this program was seen in student progress from one level to another. The following table compares the number of students in two classes who began on a certain level with the number of students on that level at the end of the year.

4th Grade

Level	Sept.	May
I	23	2
II	4	18
III	4	7
IV	0	3
V	2	1
VI	0	2

6th Grade

Level	Sept.	May
I	6	0
II	6	3
III	2	5
IV	4	3
V	2	3
VI	7	2
VII	0	2
VIII	0	4
IX	0	1

Examples of individual differences can be seen in some of the extremes in these two classes. The two students in the fourth grade who were still on Level I at the end of the school year had shown fair progress for part of the year, completing all of Level IA, but slowing down considerably when they reached the harder words of Level IB. The work of these students was characterized by frequent mistakes so that they had to go back over many lists several times. Special work had to be planned to help these students. On the other hand, one fourth grade student who also moved from Level I to the end of Level V during the school year also made very few mistakes in spelling. Of course, the "natural" spellers in both classes made very good progress. One of these students in the sixth grade moved from Level VI through Level IX with scores of 90% or higher on all tests.

Most of the children fell between those extremes, however, progressing steadily for the most part, with the occasional need to go back over lists to review for mastery.

For testing to determine whether mastery of words was retained over a longer period of time, it was decided at the end of the year to give a fifty-word, random-sample test, similar to those given at the beginning of the year. Students who started on a given level were tested again on that level, regardless of how far they had moved above that level.

A comparison of the September and May scores for the two classes charted above shows a substantial gain for those students who had started on Level I.

In the fourth grade the average (arithmetical mean) per cent correct in September had been 65%. In May this had increased to an 85% correct. Of this group of fourth graders, only two had scores below 80% on the May test, while four students had scores above 90% on this test.

In the sixth grade, the percentage correct had increased from 68% to 90%. Only two students in this group scored below 90%, with the lowest score being 76% and the highest score 100%.

The lowest average per cent correct on the May test was the 75% scored by the group of sixth graders who began on Level II. However, this was a gain over the 63% correct this group scored on the Level II inventory at the beginning of the school year.

At first glance it seemed disappointing that many of the scores on these 50-word tests were under 90% when the children had been held to a 90% accuracy as they progressed through the lists. However, aside from the fact that the random-sample of 50 words may have contained more than the average of the 10% of the words missed by a given child, it should also be noted that each level of words contains a number of review words from lower levels so that as a child goes on he stands a good chance of meeting the particularly troublesome words again.

The gain shown by the students beginning on Level I is considered to be the most significant, for this level contains those words used most frequently by children in their own writing. Also, most of the children who started on this level were children who normally have difficulty with spelling. If the gain shown in this study is retained, these students will be better equipped for their school work than they were, even though this gain may never be discernible on a standardized spelling achievement test.

In general, parent reaction to this spelling program could be summarized as being favorable to the idea of having each child work at his own level,

but not always happy about the materials used because they were so difficult to handle. Parents who like to help children with their work want some kind of workbook so that lists would not be easily lost or destroyed as our duplicated papers often were.

The reporting system which was explained earlier in this paper seemed to cause no concern among parents; indeed it evoked very little comment. It was explained to the parents the first reporting period at parent-teacher conferences. However, this system was used only in the intermediate grades. In grades 2 and 3 the teachers elected to remain with the conventional A, B, C, D, or F system. Here the teachers did experience some difficulty in deciding how to mark students who were working at varying levels. It was also in these grades that some complaints were received from parents about marks given.

In spite of the dissatisfaction expressed by teachers about some aspects of this program, there was basic agreement about the value of individualization. There was no desire to return to a traditional treatment of spelling, but teachers instead expressed the hope that spelling materials could be found which were adaptable to individualization and yet organized enough so that teachers, children (and parents, if need be) could use them easily.

Teachers also expressed a desire for material which allowed some formal presentation of spelling helps. With these qualifications in mind the group involved in the experimentation agreed to work with Botel's Spelling and Writing Patterns, a structural linguistic, multi-level program published by Follet Publishing Company. It is hoped that by applying the best of the ideas and techniques learned from the past year's experiences to this program and adapting it to suit our needs, that an even more successful spelling program may be developed.